

The socio-ecological complexity of the African hinterlands. Tuléar and the recent commodity booms in southwestern Madagascar

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Many African cities are experiencing fast processes of urbanisation, which pose challenge the sustainable provision of basic goods and services to their populations. At the same time the social and economic linkages of these urban centres with rural areas supplying much of such goods continue being close although ever-evolving, often as a consequence of influences from beyond the local sphere. The case of the regional capital of southwestern Madagascar, Tuléar, and its hinterland is illustrative of these issues. Having experienced an intense growth in the last decades, the city has had a deep impact on its surrounding environment, particularly due to the urban demand for domestic energy and food. In parallel, Tuléar has played a pivotal role in the articulation of the cross-scalar dynamics connecting global markets to rural producers throughout the region, particularly in relation with agricultural commodity booms. That was the case of the maize export market triggered by the demand from Île de la Réunion in the 1990s, or the ongoing cotton boom, spurred by the installation of several Chinese companies and processing factories in the area. While catalysing profound rural land-use change processes, these dynamics might encourage urban actors to engage in the boom attracted by the promise of rapid gains, which in turn can result in the surge of speculative cycles and distorted market practices. This paper therefore explores how the recent commodity booms in southwestern Madagascar have affected through time the rural-urban interface in a sensitive regional socio-ecological context.